

Carson House
Second and "M" Streets
Eureka, Humboldt County
California

HABS No. CAL-1911

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
Western Office, Division of Design and Construction
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PHOTOGRAPH-DATA BOOK REPORT
HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

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CARSON HOUSE

Eureka, Humboldt County, California

ADDRESS: Second and "M" Streets
OWNER: The Ingomar Club
OCCUPANT: The Ingomar Club
USE: Men's Private Club

HISTORICAL AND ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE

The Carson House is one of the grand examples of the very last stages of Victorian American architecture in wood. Constructed by William Carson, and designed by Newsom Brothers in 1885, it was apparently a "works project" to employ men at Carson's redwood mill in a slack season. The house was occupied by the family until recent years, when it passed to the La Boyteaux' and finally in 1950 to the Ingomar Club. Three stories in height, with a lofty off-center tower, the Carson mansion is a flamboyant Stick-Villa with highly personalized ornamental details. The richly carved interior (especially the stair hall) remains as it was, in large measure.

HISTORICAL INFORMATION

Technically, the house under consideration is the "second" Carson House, built for William McKendrie Carson in 1885. The "first" Carson House was a less ambitious residence, across the street from the "second" great mansion. Carson came to California in 1849. He was part owner of a flour mill in the 1860's and went into lumber. Finally making a more concerted program of mill development, Carson formed a partnership with Dolbeer; their first mill was at the site of the present Carson House. The firm prospered and Carson became one of the

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leading citizens of Northern California. (Dolbeer and Carson were the third largest exporters of lumber in Eureka throughout the later 1860's and 1870's)

It is usually related that the lumber business was at a low ebb in 1885, and William Carson determined on a massive personal project to employ his temporarily inactive employees. Most of the craftsmen employed on the mansion were practitioners of related trades at the mill - carpenters, carvers, plumbers, etc.

The great house was begun in 1885 and completed in the early fall of 1886. The Carson family occupied their new redwood mansion in October of 1886. Mr. Carson continued to live in the house until his death in 1912; after that, his eldest son, Milton, lived here until his death.

Mr. and Mrs. Clarence La Boyteaux purchased the property in 1944 and lived in the house until 1950, when they sold to the Ingomar Club. (The Club had been organized in 1949 by J. H. Crothers and Carl Gustafson. It was suggested that the Carson House would be an ideal center for the new organization, and verbal agreement was reached with the owners in October of 1949. Seventy men subscribed for the purchase price. After a manager and staff was recruited, the Club opened on April 1, 1950. The name Ingomar derives from the Ingomar Theater on the third floor of the Buhne Building in Eureka, built by William Carson. The Club is a corporation, with by-laws adopted by the Board of Directors on May 18, 1950.)

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL AND SOURCES

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- Irvine, Leigh H., History of Humboldt County, Los Angeles, Historical Record Company, 1915.
- Kirker, Harold, California's Architectural Frontier, San Marino, Huntington Library, 1960, pp. 51, 111, 112 and Plates 50 and 51.

- Lewis, Oscar, Here Lived the Californians, New York, Rinehart and Company, 1957.
- Newsom, J. Cather and Samuel, Picturesque California Homes, San Francisco, no date, No. 2 (cf. also the Picturesque Homes and Artistic Buildings of J. Cather Newsom, 1890)
- Withey, Henry F. and Elsie R., Biographical Dictionary of American Architects (Deceased), Los Angeles, New Age Publishing Company, 1956, p. 440 (biog. of Samuel Newsom).
- Various Writers of the Humboldt Times, Souvenir of Humboldt County, Los Angeles, Historical Record Company, 1915.

Newspapers and Periodicals:

- Architect and Engineer, XIV No. 2 (September, 1908), p. 79; obituary of Samuel Newsom.
- California Architect and Building News, V (June, 1884) p. 114.
- California Highway Patrolman, March, 1950.
- Humboldt Times, (Eureka), March 12, 1950; May 1959. (Article)
- Motorland, July-August, 1961 (cover photograph).

Reports:

- Niles, Margaret, Report for Course in American Architecture, University of California, Davis, Fall of 1961. Author's Collection.
- Van Fleet, Ellen, Report for Course in American Architecture, University of California, Davis. Now at Humboldt State College Library.

ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

Samuel Newsom, the architect, was Canadian born and died of a heart attack on a Key Route ferry, crossing San Francisco Bay, September 1, 1908. He was active in the San Francisco area from 1870 to 1907. His early business associate was his brother, Joseph Cather Newsom. Following Joseph Cather Newsom's withdrawal from the firm, Samuel's two sons became his associates and successors. Although known for some public buildings, such as the old City Hall and Court House of Oakland, Samuel Newsom was especially renowned locally for his residential architecture. With his brother, J. Cather Newsom, he published two volumes of plates entitled Picturesque California Homes.

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This presented the firm's style of design quite clearly. As with many later 19th century American architects, the Newsoms were so caught up in the flurry of various fashion changes in ornament and materials that they were incapable of joining the great mainstream of local carpentry and anonymous design which eventually led to a form of modern architecture in the 1890's. Nor were they, like Wright and the Brothers Greene, as well as Maybeck, especially concerned with linking integrity of craftsmanship with exotic oriental overtones. As a result, most of the Newsom houses were awesome indeed. Like those enormous white elephants which careen out of the pages of Picturesque Homes, the Newsom residences were curious mixtures of tortured carpentry and Stick-Shingle. The Carson House is undoubtedly the masterpiece of this manner in the United States - with its gaunt late Villa shape covered in a bizarre pot-pourri of "personalized" forms. The end result is a Stick-Villa, with early Shingle hints, and an authority in expression so aggressively frightful as to be enchanting.

EXTERIOR

Solidly built from the ground up, the house has separate foundations for each wall - inside and out. The framing and principal structural and decorative members are entirely of redwood. The principal entrance faces west and the general design of the house is oriented to this view. In type, the Carson House is a Stick-Villa, and reveals the superficial ornamental changes in the Villa of the 1880's from such a Villa as the present Governor's Mansion in Sacramento of 1877. The lofty, more or less off-center tower and picturesque massing are characteristic of the later Villas of 19th century American architecture.

In the tower especially, and in the rear of the house, one can see interest in stick or strip articulation - so common in California houses of the 1880's. Reduplicated strips frame the corners of the vertical rhythms from story to story. Most of the upper exterior wall surfaces have variations on shingle patterns - either of an undulant type or a more scale-like type (the latter especially characteristic of the later 1880's). With its grotesquely steep gables and delayed Victorian Gothic barge boards, the house reflects that interest in medievalizing forms which produced Stick, Shingle and Queen Anne designs. (Rounded towers at the rear of the Carson House also suggest Queen Anne.) There are, of course, some "original" decorative features

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which make this house virtually unique. In general, architects of the period drew upon 16th century Mannerist sources without always realizing what they were doing. The bulbous, out-size, eccentric "spindle" pillars of the principal porch which encircles the west and south sides of the house, the bizarre broken and canted pediment over the main stair, and the extremely tall, constricted feeling of ornamental parts - this is Mannerist. The exact source is more easily seen as Eastlake patterns modified by an interest in later 16th century English and Italian details; but the end result is a special mixture which is grandiosely hideous in the inspired manner of certain Roman "follies" of the 16th century. There is, fortunately, only one such house in California.

There have been minor modifications of the exterior (removal of unsteady exterior chimneys, removal of finials, etc); but the general effect is virtually the same today as it was in the photograph published in Souvenir of Humboldt County in 1902, when the extremely stark flavor of the first years of the house had been softened by growing plants. The original iron balustrade¹ remains on the second floor, encircling the area above the main porch and providing a balcony of great amplitude at this level. The iron cresting on the roofs of the third floor either has been removed or replaced with wood balustrading. The house has been repainted in more recent years. Some additions have been made to suit the purposes of the Ingomar Club, but they are at the side of the house and do not alter its original character.

INTERIOR

This great three story house, with frontal tower, rose from a full basement. The mansion contained eighteen rooms in its original form. A squared vestibule with double doors (the outer door is a sliding one; the inner doors are a pair of tall wood doors with stained glass windows² and stained glass transom above) leads into the interior. The principal rooms of the main, first floor are a pair of parlors and the dining room; the latter is said to have been modeled on the Maximilian dining room at Chapultepec Castle in Mexico. The relationship is certainly not direct, although there are similarities in shape and general character; the dining room at Chapultepec is much larger in scale than that at Eureka, and the wood dados, overmantels and cupboards differ in detail. Primavera wood is especially utilized in the great stair hall and staircase of the Carson House.³ The parlors

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have Mexican onyx mantels and either a carved mahogany and redwood overmantel with stained glass window (left parlor) or large mirror (right parlor). Parlor walls are either painted or fabric covered, and do not presently reflect the original wall coverings. Ceilings throughout the first floor have raised plaster geometric patterns, vaguely suggestive of the ceilings of the 16th century. At the cornice level are elaborate carved wood bracketed cornices, or less elaborate plaster cornices. Here the approach of more "correct" Period ornament can be seen in rows of egg and dart or other modified Classical moldings. The wood work, particularly in the vestibule and entrance stair hall, on the other hand, reflects the bizarre local variations on Eastlake, Tudor and Mannerist sources. Plaster rosettes in the centers of the principal rooms' ceilings once focussed attention on gasoliers; the present fixtures are electric and date from the 20's and 50's of the 20th century. Occasional pieces of furniture survive from the first period of the house (notably the massive oak table and tapestry-covered oak chairs of the dining room).

At the landing of the great main staircase is a stained glass window facing west, with panels depicting the arts and sciences. There is a large drawing room on the second floor - also with an onyx mantel, surmounted by a massive mirror. Perhaps the strangest single feature of the second floor is the hallway with its horseshoe arches of carved wood - now painted. Cornice details on this floor, as on the first, reflect more "correct" Period styling - having Classical moldings. The hall walls are now covered in grass cloth. Doors and door frames are similar on both first and second floors; pseudo-fluted pilasters of an entirely "original" design frame doors with three vertical recessed panels over four rectilinear recessed panels. Continuing the frame over the door are grouped moldings approaching Classical types.⁴ Hardware is generally original; lighting fixtures on the second floor are modern.

The third floor has a ballroom decorated with paintings, etchings and engravings from Gump's in San Francisco; there is also a billiard room at this level, with ranks of cue racks. An elevator has been installed in the house in more recent years. Magnificent views can be had from the tower.

SITE

The Carson House occupied virtually a city block. Surrounding the

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great wooden mansion are spreading lawns, with a path through miniature woods to the former greenhouse, vegetable garden and orchard. At the rear of the house was a wood shed of generous proportions and a carriage house.

NOTES (Architectural Information)

1. The initials WC are woven into the portions directly over the main entrance to the porch (west and south).
2. Said to be based on Shakespearean drama, but apparently simply a late medieval knight (left side) and lady with dog (right).
3. Carson sent one of his own ships to South America to bring back 97,000 feet of the light-colored Primavera wood.
4. Windows originally had wood shutters; they are generally draped at the present time. A few doors in this house are of wood and glass - notably those which give onto hall vistas.

Prepared by,

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May 1964

APPROVED:

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DATE: *December 1964*

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National Park Service

Addendum To
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